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ABSTRACT

To answer questions about who goes to college, who persists toward a degree or credential, and what happens to students after they enroll, the National Center for Education Statistics launched three national longitudinal studies to track students movements into and through the postsecondary education system. These three surveys, the National Education Longitudinal Study, the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study, and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Study, provide findings about college access, student characteristics, and academic persistence. College students today are a diverse group; 30% are minorities, 20% were born outside of the United States or have a parent who was, and 11% spoke a language other than English while growing up. Only 40% of college students fit the traditional mold of enrolling immediately after high school and depending on their parents to take care of financial responsibilities. About three-quarters of all four-year college students now earn a paycheck, and about one-quarter work full time. A young persons likelihood of attending a four-year college increases with the level of their parents education. More at-risk students apply to college if their friends plan to go, but the price of attending college is still a significant obstacle for students from low- and middle-income families. Financial aid is an equalizer to some degree. Most

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students who leave college enroll again within 6 years, but many enroll in other institutions. As a result, the records of individual institutions often understate the overall postsecondary persistence. (SLD)

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Access & Persistence: Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students

by Susan P. Choy

Introduction

What do we really know about who's going to college? Who persists on the path toward a college degree or credential? What happens to students after they enroll?

To answer these questions, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) launched three national longitudinal studies to track students' movements into and through the postsecondary education system. These three surveys, launched more than a decade ago, include the National Education Longitudinal Study, the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study, and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Study. Detailed descriptions of the surveys can be downloaded from the NCES web site at http://nces.ed.gov. Some of the surveys' key findings about college access, student characteristics, and academic persistence are summarized below.

College Students Today

- Today's college students are a diverse group: 30 percent are minorities, 20 percent were born outside the United States or have a foreign-born parent, and 11 percent spoke a language other than English while growing up.

- Traditionally, four-year college students have enrolled full time immediately after graduating from high school; depended on their parents to take care of most, if not all, financial responsibilities; and worked part time or not at all. Today, only 40 percent of four-year college students fit this traditional mold.

- About three-quarters of all four-year college students now earn a paycheck, and about one-quarter of them work full time.

Access to College

- A young person's likelihood of attending a four-year college increases with the level of their parents' education. This is true even for the most highly qualified high school seniors.

- Taking challenging mathematics courses can mitigate the effect of parents' education on college enrollment. The association between taking a rigorous high school math curriculum and going to college is strong for all students, but especially for those whose parents did not go beyond high school.

- More at-risk students apply to college if their friends plan to go. College outreach programs, as well as parental and school support with the application process, also have proven worthwhile.

- The price of attending college is still a significant obstacle for students from low- and middle-income families, but financial aid is an equalizer, to some degree. Low-income students enroll at the same rate as middle-income students if they take all the necessary steps toward enrollment.

Staying in School Once Enrolled

- Even if students leave the first college in which they enroll, they do not necessarily drop out of the postsecondary system; they often transfer to another school. Therefore, the dropout and completion records of individual institutions understate the overall postsecondary persistence.

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- Students can increase their likelihood of succeeding in college by enrolling in a rigorous high school program and limiting the number of hours they work while in college.

- Risk factors that make it more difficult for students to complete college include working full time, starting at a community college, and having parents who did not attend college.

The Importance of the First Year

- Most students who leave college during or after their first year return sometime during the next six years. More often, though, they enroll in a different institution, rather than returning to the first one.

Time to Degree

- Sixty-four percent of students who earned their bachelor's degree in 1992-1995 had finished within five years, meaning that just over one-third had taken more than five years to earn their degree.

Life After College

- About one-third of those who earned their bachelor's degree enroll in a graduate program within four years. Men and women enroll at the same rates but tend to select different programs. Women are less likely to choose MBA, professional, and doctoral programs, and are more likely to choose master's programs other than an MBA.

- Although students whose parents did not go to college are at a disadvantage with respect to college access and persistence, if they do finish a bachelor's degree, their employment outcomes are similar to those of their peers with college-educated parents.

- Just over one-third of all graduates were repaying student loans four years after they finished college. They payments, averaging about $150 per month, were not burdensome for most when compared with their incomes, although these pre-date recent large increases in borrowing.

Conclusion

Developing a keen understanding of what has been learned about these issues from students is the first step higher education leaders can take toward expanding opportunities for all students. Campus leaders might use these studies and data as guideposts for examining the critical characteristics and experiences of their current and prospective students.

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